comment

PALAEOANTHROPOLOGY AND LOCAL LEGENDS

Homo floresiensis *in the news*

Although discovered just a few months ago, *Homo floresiensis* will by now be well known not just to anthropologists but to a wider audience interested in human evolution. The name, of course, refers to what palaeoanthropologists have interpreted as a new species of the genus *Homo* – an endemic dwarf just over a metre high with a brain measuring just 380 cc – which lived as recently as 13,000 years ago on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores. Another name mentioned in the same context is *ebu gogo*, which a geologist with the discovery team encountered during a visit to a village in central Flores three weeks prior to the announcement of the find in the journal *Nature* on 28 October 2004. As astonishing as any feature of this incredible story is the suggestion that *ebu gogo* may be the indigenous Florinese name for the species, which could have survived into historic times and even still be living on Flores. The possibility of *Homo floresiensis*' survival has the support of a number of scientific commentators, including no less a figure than Richard Dawkins.

In fact, the name *ebu gogo* may have been familiar to social and cultural anthropologists interested in eastern Indonesia well before the discovery of *Homo floresiensis*. As I described in my book on the Nage people of central Flores (*Beneath the volcano* 1998:103-09), *ebu gogo* denotes a local category, a population of short, hairy hominoids (or 'wildmen', as I have called them) reputedly inhabiting Lia Ula, a cave in Nage territory, until they were exterminated by residents of the village of 'Ua, perhaps 200 years ago. In the same book, I compared *ebu gogo* with a variety of spiritual beings recognized by Nage. I then provisionally concluded that *ebu gogo* may represent something other than a purely imaginary creature, and moreover that they 'may well have some empirical basis in a former component of the human population of Flores' (Forth 1998: 105). Part of my evidence was the Nage assertion that *ebu gogo*, whom their ancestors had rendered extinct, were real creatures and not 'spirits' (*nitu*).

Although not identified, the central Florinese village visited by the aforementioned geologist was in all likelihood the main Nage settlement of Bo'a Wae. What is certain is that *ebu gogo* is a Nage category, and not one found in Manggarai, the linguistically and culturally quite distinct region in western Flores where the skeletal evidence for *Homo floresiensis* was discovered. Nevertheless, Manggarai people also maintain representations of hairy manlike beings which might with equal credibility be linked with *Homo floresiensis*, as do the Lio people (whose territory appears to be the part of Flores visited in November by a *Daily Mail* reporter in search of hairy 'hobbits'). Moreover, stories told by Lio and Manggarai people suggest that, rather than having been exterminated by local ancestors, such creatures, although rare, may still survive. Yet the Nage name *ebu gogo* is the one that has caught on as a reference to *Homo floresiensis*' putative descendants; in fact, for publicity purposes, it was even suggested as an alternative to 'hobbit' (an unfortunate choice in my opinion, but one that has arguably involved less misrepresentation than might *ebu gogo*).

Recently published remarks on *ebu gogo* have referred to several morphological and behavioural features which are supposed to match ones inferred for *Homo floresiensis*. The list (which includes short stature, long arms, pot bellies and an awkward gait) does not entirely match my own, compiled over a period of 20 years of ethnographic research in central Flores. (For example, the creatures described to me were not always so short; nor do long arms or awkward bipedalism clearly figure in my records.). Furthermore, evidently missing from the story told to the geological visitor was the major detail of *ebu gogo*'s destruction by local humans, as well as certain features that may be considered more fantastic. These include the attribution of pendulous breasts to the females and an ability to speak a variety of the local language – though one judged by Nage to be imperfect and interspersed with an 'mmm' sound. While these do not obviously support an identification with *Homo floresiensis* (whose linguistic abilities, in the light of its chimpanzee-sized brain, are debatable at best), they do tend to group *ebu gogo* with legendary creatures the world over, among whom hairiness and pendulous breasts are ubiquitous features. Thus, the Nage representation of *ebu gogo* may turn out to be imaginary, or largely imaginary, after all. If nothing else, the question of a possible connection between *Homo floresiensis* and figures like *ebu gogo* is far more complex than has been suggested so far.

But I don't wish to end on a completely sceptical note. As my 1998 remarks should suggest, I am sympathetic to the view that *ebu gogo* may be grounded in some empirical, even hominological, reality. And as amazing as it may seem, the speculation that something corresponding to *Homo floresiensis* could still be alive, or at least have lived so recently to have made an imprint on local memory, is one that I believe can reasonably be taken as a point of departure for further anthropological, including ethnographic, investigation. The palaeoanthropologists would appear to concur, as some are planning an investigation of *ebu gogo*'s cave this summer. Much remains to be clarified regarding the palaeontological discovery, since by no means everyone is agreed with regard, for example, to the species assignment or the archaeological associations. But however this debate unfolds, such an unusual convergence of ethnographic and palaeoanthropological enquiry is one that merits the attention of anthropologists of various kinds. ●

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